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CORD MEYER

THE DAMAGE THAT ESPIONAGE CAN DO

Presenting a potential threat to the invulnerability of U.S. ballistic missile submarines, the Walker spy case has jolted both the Congress and the public into a new awareness of the damage spies can do. It is no longer fashionable to joke about espionage as if it were a nasty game or a fit subject for bad movies.

As the full investigative resources of the U.S. intelligence community are brought to bear to discover the extent to which American codes, communications, and defensive tactics may have been compromised and must be changed, an extraordinary article has appeared in a recent issue of the English magazine *Encounter*. It throws new light on the history of espionage in World War II and draws lessons directly relevant to the American effort to cauterize any wounds caused by the Walker spy case.

The triumphs of British and Americans in breaking the German and Japanese codes in World War II have been widely trumpeted. But little had been published about the intelligence coups pulled off by Nazi Germany until a retired and well-respected senior British intelligence official, James Rusbridger, did the original research among old war records that resulted in his article, "The Sinking of the Automedon."

As a little-known example of German penetration of American codes that occurred even before the United States entered World War II, Mr. Rusbridger cites the case of an Italian employee at the U.S. Embassy in Rome who in August 1941 picked the lock of the American military attache's safe and photographed his cipher for the Germans. As a result, the Nazi high command for 18 months was able to read all U.S. military attache cables around the world.

Since Winston Churchill had instructed his commanders in Cairo to keep the American military attache fully informed on British plans and intentions, the most damaging effect of this German penetration was to give Gen. Rommel advance knowledge of British moves as described in the American attache's cables from Cairo to Washington. There is no way of counting how many more British soldiers had to die in desert fighting because of this one brief chink in the security armor of the United States.

Far more disastrous for both British and American interests were the consequences that flowed from a British decision to send a top-secret copy of their War Cabinet minutes for Aug. 8, 1940, to their commander in Singapore via a vulnerable, slow merchant ship, the Automedon, instead of by flying boat or by armed destroyer.

When a German raider seized, searched, and sank the Automedon on Nov. 11, 1940, German intelligence obtained the 87 detailed paragraphs of the War Cabinet minutes, which spelled out how completely unprepared the British were to offer any real resistance if the Japanese attacked Indochina, Malaya, Singapore, or the Dutch East Indies.

At Hitler's specific request, this devastating admission of allied weakness in the Pacific was passed to the Japanese on Dec. 12, 1940. Japanese Adm. Kondo was later to tell the Germans that this intelligence was critical to the successful planning of the attacks on Pearl Harbor, the Philippines, and Singapore in December 1941. The original damage caused by this grievous loss was compounded by an attempt afterward to cover it up and not to admit it to either the British commander in Singapore or to the Americans.

Another disastrous chain of events was set in motion May 10, 1942, by the capture of the Australian steamer Nankin by another German raider. In a search, the Germans found on board among the general mail four top-secret summaries for the period March 21 to April 20, 1942, of the Combined Operations Intelligence Center at Wellington, New Zealand.

Negligently loaded on the Nankin, these most sensitive estimates of current and future Japanese naval movements clearly revealed to both Germans and Japanese that the United States had broken the Japanese naval code. The Japanese immediately changed their codes, on Aug. 29, 1942, and a series of serious American naval losses followed before the United States recovered the capacity to read the new codes some months later.

If there is one lesson that emerges from these events and from the refusal of the Germans to admit to themselves that their own top-secret Enigma code had been broken by the British, it is the necessity after an intelligence loss for the most ruthless damage assessment that does not shrink from the worst consequences — even if it means costly and time-consuming reconstruction and replacement.

In the first few days after the Walker case broke, reassuring comment that the damage was limited came from some American officials and sounded like whistling in the dark.

James Rusbridger's cautionary tales from World War II should teach all concerned that prompt, cold-eyed admission to oneself and to one's allies of the full extent of an intelligence loss is the only way to contain the damage.

Cord Meyer is a nationally syndicated columnist.